

The Magi and the mad King

Matthew 2:1-16

Pastor Wyley Jenkins, Jr.

There are four Gospels, Matthew, Mark Luke, and John. They are not biographies in the modern sense of the term. The Gospel writers had slightly different audiences and purposes for their Gospels. Matthew wrote one of the Gospels, and most likely wrote his Gospel to a Jewish audience. He wanted to present Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who came to set up a Kingdom. This is what the Jews were waiting for.

Matthew's emphasis can be seen in many ways. One way is to compare the genealogy and birth story of Matthew to the genealogy and birth story of Luke. In his genealogy, Matthew goes back to Abraham, the Father of the Jews. Luke goes all the way back to Adam, the Father of humanity. Why would Matthew not go all the way back to Adam? It is because that is not that important for Matthew's Jewish audience. They want to know if he is the Messiah, and the only connection needed to prove that is David and Abraham. For Luke's more mixed Jewish and Greek audience, it would be important to show the common link between all peoples, and so going all the way back to Adam makes sense. Also, Matthew does not use the same family tree as Luke. Matthew traces Jesus lineage through the Kings of Israel, showing Jesus to be in the line of the kings. Luke follows another son of David who does not become King. Both genealogies lead to Mary or to Joseph. But for Matthew, he chooses to pick the King's lineage to show the Jewish people that Jesus is really the Messiah King.

In Luke's Gospel, the angels come to the poor, humble shepherds, to let them know to look for Jesus in a manger. Matthew does not even mention this story. He focuses instead on how these Kings, wise men or Magi came looking for a king. So, both Gospels are telling true stories, but they are sharing parts of the story that emphasize important truths to their audiences. If you only have a single opportunity to share who Jesus is with a lost friend, you would most likely do the same. You would think of what the person who is receiving needs to hear most.

So, when you come to [Matthew 2:1-16](#), you can know that Jesus is being presented as a King worthy of worship. That is why the story begins the way it does. The story can be summarized in four scenes:

1. The Magi come to Jerusalem looking for the newborn King to worship him (v.1-2)
2. Herod is disturbed and plots to find the newborn King (v.3-8)
3. The Magi come and worship the baby Jesus bringing gifts for a king (v.9-11)
4. Herod is disturbed and plots to murder the newborn King (v.12-16)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

The ESV text says that wise men came from the east. The older translation called them kings. But honestly, they are not really kings like European Monarchs, nor are they wise men like Oxford professors. What then are they? The first clue is that the word used is not of Greek origin. Though the New Testament was written in Greek, the word used here and translated as wise men is Persian in origin. *Magi* is the word. This is the word used to describe the prophet Daniel and the men he worked within Babylon. So, at times, they were rulers like Daniel was a ruler, and so they were a kind of King. At other times, they were more like spiritual helpers like Daniel was. They interpreted the stars, the King's dreams, and at times interceded for the kings of their countries, all the while influencing the governing policies of the kings they served. They were highly respected people. Though the Bible does not say where they came from, Babylon or Persia would be the most likely place.

The more important thing to note is that these wise men must have had some kind of contact with the Jewish scriptures. That was not uncommon, because they would have studied all kinds of sacred texts, like the Bible. How would they have gotten those sacred texts? God allowed the King of Babylon to capture Israel and deport thousands of Jews to his kingdom. The Persians later conquered Babylon, and again some of the Jews moved to the new capital of Persia. Without a doubt these Jewish populations spread the belief that one day a Messiah, Savior and Deliverer would rise up from within the Jewish people. These Magi would most likely have heard of all of these prophecies. And the one prophecy that they seem to follow comes from Numbers 24:17. It says:

"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

If it was Babylon, then it was a 1,300 km trip one way, by camel most likely. That was through deserts and places of robbers and thieves. This trip would take 40 days at 32 km per day. Since they were carrying gold and other gifts for a king, they would have surely had soldiers and many servants travelling with them. So there were definitely more than three travelers. It does not say they followed a star to Jerusalem. They saw a star rise and assumed that if a Jewish King would be born, it would be in a palace. They went to the current King, asking about the birth of the great Jewish King. These guys were not Jewish monotheists, but probably pagans who worshiped all kinds of gods. They were seekers. They came to worship him.

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

In this section, we really get the first look at the current Jewish King, Herod the Great. Herod was born in 73 BC to Idumean (the region of Edom) parents who had converted to Judaism. He was allowed by the Romans to rule over Judea, from 40 BC all the way until his death around 4 BC. Herod was a very sly and astute ruler. He defeated the Parthians during his first 3 years of being King, and established a stable government. He also managed to keep each Roman Emperor and governor pleased with his service, so that even though they were the big kings, he could remain the little king. He is most famous for rebuilding the temple complex, and for losing his mind the last few years of his life. In his paranoid years, he killed his favorite wife, 2 of his sons, and also many of his life long friends. One Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, said it is better to be a pig in Herod's house than a son, because Jews don't kill pigs!

As the Magi were joyous, the mad King, Herod, was disturbed. All Jerusalem was disturbed with him. The Jewish people longed for the Messiah, but they feared the King. If he thought that there was a rival, he would stop at nothing to kill him, and he would potentially cause great damage to any people around him. Jerusalem was disturbed for its own peace and safety. What a backward way of being. The Jewish ruler wanted power, and so he wanted to get rid of Jesus. The Jewish people wanted peace and safety, and so they were willing to sacrifice him as well. This is a point that will repeat itself again and again. The Jewish religious leaders think Jesus is dangerous. So, God sends his Son into the world, and the Magi seek to worship him while the very people he came to seek and save want to rid themselves of him.

Notice that Matthew shares that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This tiny town was not politically important. It was not a military stronghold. It was famous for biblical reasons. Rachael, the wife of Jacob, was buried close to Bethlehem. Ruth met Boaz there. Moreover, the greatest King in the history of the Jewish nation, David, was born there. But the most important detail about Bethlehem is that it was also the place where the Messiah King was prophesied to be born. Why did Herod want to know the time when the star appeared? He wanted to know the time when the star appeared, because he wanted to determine the age of the child. That would help him be sure he killed the right child.

⁹ After listening to the King, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

They went on their way, and Herod went on his. They rejoice to see the star. What was the star? There are many possible scientific explanations, but whatever caused the star is not that important. It appears that something truly amazing was happening as they got close to Bethlehem. It somehow rests over the place where Jesus was. It was as if God himself was shining a spotlight on Jesus. Matthew is not very dramatic. His writing is fairly straightforward. That is why his description of the

reaction of the Magi is so very important. It tells us that whatever they saw, it must have been amazing: *“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”* Words sometimes cannot express our emotions. They don’t match. But Matthew’s attempt to describe their reaction should be meditated on. What does it mean to “rejoice exceedingly with great joy”? It must have been something supernatural.

¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Make no mistake; whatever God had caused the star to do, it had shown them to the house where Jesus was. They came ready to worship. Notice that even though they see both Jesus and Mary, they only worship Jesus. You might ask, why did the gospel writer include her name here? It is hard to say, but I speculate that Mary is the only one who saw everything. Matthew heard this story of the Magi from Mary. She heard it from the Magi. Mary is not there to be worshiped; she is there to be a witness. She sees the worship of the Magi. How so they worship? They fall down. That does not mean that they tripped on the rug. It means that they see the baby that the star was shining on and knew that something divine is going on. They assume the most popular Middle Eastern way of worship. They get on the ground face down as an act of reverence. The only correct reaction to God is worship. God had given his proof that this child was the correct one, and they reacted to that.

The Magi give their best. They love God with all their hearts by loving the one God sent. They give gifts of great value. There has been much speculation about why these three gifts were given. It is hard to say for sure, but each had a very specific use. Gold was the sign of royalty and would be helpful for the years that Jesus would live in Egypt. Frankincense was a famous incense burned by priests in prayer. Myrrh was a very sweet-smelling spice and was used for many things. It was a common spice for embalming the dead. They probably had no idea that Jesus was the King of the universe. They could not have known that he is the High priest forever. They certainly did not know that he would be crucified and buried, only to rise three days later. Jesus knew, and he predicted it several times. They could not have known that Jesus is the eternal King, the Great High Priest, and the Prophet of God. God moved through the Magi, and they brought the right gifts.

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (. . .) ¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

These wise men were not only led to Jesus, but God led them away from Jesus for his own protection. Herod interprets their lack of communication as deception. He thinks that he has been tricked by them. He reacts in a fury. He decides that the only way to keep his kingdom safe is to exterminate all the baby boys in Bethlehem under two years old. That is why he asked the time that the star first appeared. He needs to know the relative age of the child. His murderous and evil deeds would follow his name forever. He killed the babies to keep his power. This is what I believe Matthew wants us to see and also what God wants to show us. Jesus is a threat to evil rulers. He is light, and they are darkness. He is the only true King. Here are some important applications of the story:

1. Jesus came not only to save sinners, but to reign over a Kingdom

His kingdom is unlike the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus calls evil, evil. He loves and cares for his people. He teaches us to serve others and not ourselves. That is the threat. Evil people live preying on the weak, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner. Jesus builds a kingdom from these people. His kingdom is not of this earth. Jesus did not leave a Pope on the throne of Rome to lead his armies. Jesus kingdom is the opposite of earthly kingdoms. Herod was threatened. Jesus did not come to be your Savior only. He came to be your Lord and King. If you take Jesus the Savior and reject Jesus the Lord, then you are really rejecting Jesus. Is he your Savior and Lord? Are you in his Kingdom or did you just want to be saved from Hell? Be Christians all about his Kingdom!

2. All humans are worshipers

One famous Pastor says, *"Human beings, by their very nature, are worshipers. Worship is not something we do; it defines who we are. You cannot divide human beings into those who worship and those who don't. Everybody worships; it's just a matter of what, or whom, we serve."* Everyone worships because everyone is created to worship. Religious people worship. Non-religious people worship. So, what is worship then? Worship is devotion to what you love. What you worship is what or whom you give credit to for the good you have. What you worship is what you are passionate about. Having what you worship brings joy, and not having it brings sadness. One easy way to see what people worship is by observing what they do when it is threatened or taken away. If you worship power like Herod, and that is threatened, then it will become clear. Many times, the rich who become poor suddenly commit suicide. Though there are many important decisions you could make in your life, what you choose to worship will determine the course of your life. The Magi who came from the east worshipped baby Jesus.

3. Worship requires sacrifice

Can you think of an offering that does not cost something, risk something or require something? They sacrificed time, money, safety and health to worship Jesus. To many people, they appear to be risking greatly. That is what the people of their time must have thought. But they were truly wise men. Herod also sacrificed. Herod also put something on the altar. He put the baby boys on the altar of his own power. He sacrificed them to assure him of his own kingdom. What about you? What are you sacrificing? Is it your family? Are you working so much that you don't even see them? Are you sacrificing your marriage? When you fantasize about having another spouse, view pornography or flirt with others who are married, you are sacrificing. Do you worship being cool or liked? Then you will sacrifice Jesus and a real relationship with him. You will hide your faith. You will sacrifice it. Another way of saying it is that worship is about what order you prioritize the things in your life. If God is first, then everything else can be in its right place. But if you put anything else above God, then it will become your god. It will demand your love and worship. It will require your sacrifice.

4. Worship brings joy

What did the Magi find when they worshiped the right person? They found amazing joy. There is no doubt that that story would become the story that they would tell their friends and family for the rest of their lives. Joy was the result of worshiping the correct thing. When Herod worshiped his own power, what was his reaction? He was greatly disturbed. What about you? Are you able to rejoice, or

does your sadness reflect hidden idols? The beauty of the Gospel is that God is at work in our hearts, showing us what we worship. Not to shame or destroy us. He wants us to truly be happy. He is refining us. You and I were created to worship God. May we be a people who learn the true power of worship.

5. We will all meet Jesus some day and we will have to present him gifts

The Magi probably journeyed at least 1,300 km to get to Jesus. You and I are also on that journey. Our journey on earth will only last so long. What is your life? It is only a vapor that appears for a little while and vanishes. When you reach the end of your life and you meet Jesus, will it be to present him with gifts? Will the things you did be like gold, frankincense and myrrh, or will it be a life spent on yourself and your own comfort? May you reach the end with something to really give to Jesus. May your journey through life be an accumulation of good works. Not works to save you, but works of worship. Works that show that you have a King that is worthy of your worship, because he saved you when you could not save yourself.

Discussion questions:

1. What stands out to you the most about the passage of Matthew 2:1-16?
2. Why is it so important to spend time understanding the original meaning of the biblical text?
3. What are some differences between the wise men and Herod? Name anything.
4. How did Herod know where the Messiah would be born?
5. Why did the Magi rejoice greatly and with exceeding joy?
6. How many people on earth are worshipers?
7. What happens when we worship the right person? What happens when we worship the wrong person or things?
8. What sacrifices did the Magi make? What sacrifices did Herod make? Which sacrifice might God be calling you to make?